

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

**DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln**

---

The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012

China Beat Archive

---

2010

## What I Read on My Summer Vacation (Part III)

Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

---

Wasserstrom, Jeffrey, "What I Read on My Summer Vacation (Part III)" (2010). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 862.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/862>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## What I Read on My Summer Vacation (Part III)

September 10, 2010 in [Books](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [Permalink](#)

By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

I'll get to books I actually *read* over the summer (or in one case, am part of the way through as I write), as opposed to simply ones I dipped into, learned about, wrote about, or thought about, in a minute. First, though, I want to mention briefly a trio of book-related summertime activities of mine that don't quite fit into the format of this series.

One of these activities was hosting the "[Cosmopolitan Conversations](#)" series. As regular readers of this blog already know, this series was held in Shanghai, co-sponsored by CET Academic Programs and M on the Bund (that restaurant that plays host to the city's annual International Literary Festival), and put me in dialog with a variety of local and Beijing-based writers. Preparing for those weekly dialogs would sometimes inspire me to flip back through the pages of books I'd already read by people scheduled to join me on stage. So, for example, before heading across the Pacific in late June, I re-read parts of Zhang Lijia's memoir, which [I reviewed](#) on this site back in 2008. Taking part in the



series also added titles to my list of things I know I'll want to read. Some of these are recently published works, such as Tess Johnston's [Permanently Temporary](#), an account of her peripatetic and eventful life; Paul French's [Fat China](#), a work coauthored by Mathew Crabbe that looks at the important issue of increasing Chinese obesity; and Graham Earnshaw's [The Great Walk of China](#), a collection of reflections on the places the author has seen and the people he's met during his extraordinary stop-and-start trips all the way across the PRC by foot. The series also got me—and many of those who came to M's Glamour Bar on Sundays in July—eager to see two books that are still in embryonic stages as soon as they are published. This is because Howard French mentioned being awarded an [Open Society Fellowship](#) that will allow him to do the research for and write a work on China and Africa (something he's uniquely qualified to do), while Evan Osnos referred to working on [a book](#) that will deal with foreigners in China.

The second book-related thing I did this summer was publish reviews of Richard McGregor's *The Party*,

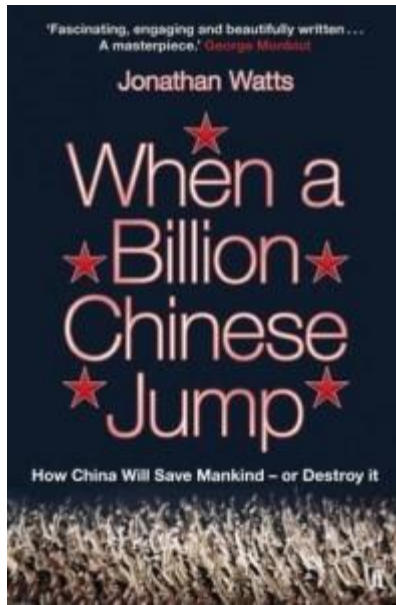


Richard Baum's *China Watcher*, and Yunte Huang's *Charlie Chan*. You might think that, at least in the case of McGregor and Huang's books (both quite new), these reviews would have been based on summer reading, but this isn't the case. Why? Because I'd gotten advance copies of those two titles and had also read Baum's book, which came out in March, in page proof form. Hence, though the reviews appeared in summer, they reflected my late winter and spring reading. The only *summer* reading inspired by this trio of books involved periodicals: I checked out what other reviewers had made of the works. This proved illuminating. And sometimes good fun, too, especially with the Charlie Chan book, a whimsical work that has inspired some clever reviews, including [one by Pico Iyer](#) that appeared under a title that, as a longtime Elvis Costello fan, I'd have loved to have thought of myself: "Watching the Detective."

A third book-related activity from my summer that I want to mention, but which doesn't quite qualify as summer reading in the ordinary sense, involves a dictionary. It would be hopelessly pretentious to refer to *reading* any dictionary over the summer, especially one as massive as Oxford's new Chinese-English/English-China dictionary, which was published this week after getting positive advance attention from [China Real Time](#), [Danwei.org](#), and other blogs. I didn't *read* the advance copy of the dictionary that I was sent, but I did have fun browsing through it—and I was very impressed, especially by special features such as a list of the characters for a host of common and not-so-common but still useful computer and Internet terms.

Now, as to the books that I actually *read* this summer, leaving out the mysteries that have nothing to do with China (unlike CB's editor Maura Cunningham, none of the whodunits I devoured, such as the latest by the [elegant stylist Tana French](#), had a Chinese angle to it), here are some things that stand out as of possible interest to readers of this blog:

- Jonathan Watts, *When a Billion Chinese Jump: How China Will Save the World—Or Destroy It*.



I've written about the virtues of this book already in [a think piece](#) published at the History News Network site, but just to sum up the key points again here, it is a wonderfully readable look at the crucially important topic of environmental degradation and experiments with green technology in China. Having long admired the smart writing that Watts had done for the *Guardian* on all sorts of issues (both in his old post as its Beijing bureau chief and his new one as its Asia Environment reporter), I was eager to see the book—and it didn't disappoint. *When a Billion Chinese Jump* is already out in other places but not yet in the U.S., but the good news for Americans is that, when it does come out here, the author will arrive, too, on tour. One of the promotional events he'll be doing will be a [November 2 dialog with Ken Pomeranz](#) right here at UC Irvine.

- James Carter, *Heart of Buddha, Heart of China: The Life of Tanxu, a Twentieth Century Monk*

This book, which is due out later this year, is another one I read in page proof form, when the publisher asked me to consider endorsing it—something I ended up being very happy to do. Carter, who is the editor of *Twentieth-Century China* and the author of a well-received earlier [monographic study of Harbin](#), has crafted one of those special books that manages to use a single life to place a period in a region or country's history into a striking new light. There are examples of works that do this in many national historiographies, with the best-known contributions to the genre dealing partly or exclusively with China being those of Jonathan Spence. Carter worked with Spence at Yale, but in some ways the previous contribution to Chinese studies that *Heart of Buddha, Heart of China* reminded me of most was not any of his teacher's books, but Henrietta Harrison's lovely *The Man Awakened from Dreams: One Man's Life in a North China Village, 1857-1942*. The Confucian scholar turned farmer turned businessman who is the focus of Harrison's micro-history stays rooted in North China, while the monk Carter follows from locale to locale rarely stays put for long, at least after embracing his spiritual calling, but both books do an excellent job at showing how, in the hands of a skilled historian, a well-told personal tale can place big collective issues, such as the complex nature of Chinese nationalism, into a novel perspective.

- Pallavi Aiyar, *Chinese Whiskers*.

This work is the one I'm mid-way through as I write this entry, but I expect to finish it very shortly in part because it is, well, very short. And because I want to know what ends up happening to the main protagonists in the story—a pair of cats (yes, that's right, cats). Described on the author's website as a "modern fable," *Chinese Whiskers* has proved so far to be a clever and entertaining look at life in a Beijing *hutong*, during the same early 21<sup>st</sup> century period that Aiyar dealt with, from a purely anthropocentric angle, in her first book, a work that was much more the thing that one expects a journalist who was finishing up a stay in China to write, mixing as it did political reporting with travel tales and a bit of personal reflection on how Chinese cultural practices were similar to and different

from those of her homeland. I don't have any special fondness for animal stories per se, but I was delighted to get an early look at this one (it's due to be published near the end of the year), because of how much I'd liked Aiyar's *Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of India* (for reasons I've detailed elsewhere [in a Foreign Policy review](#)). And so far, I've found this very different book engrossing and enjoyable.

A final summer reading note: I won't say much about another book that I read and found memorable recently, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, since Maura Cunningham has already described the considerable strengths of Barbara Demick's book on this site in the post that launched this series. I can hardly complain about *China Beat's* editor beating me to the punch, as it was partly at her suggestion that I read the book in the first place (though another thing that made me shuffle *Nothing to Envy* to the top of my "to read list" was what another CB contributor, Angilee Shah, had to say about it [here](#)). All I would add to Maura and Angilee's comments is this: for someone who took his first classes on China in the late 1970s and then did graduate work on the country in the early-to-mid 1980s, there's a sense of déjà vu to discovering that Demick's main research strategy was to carry out intensive interviews with émigrés from North Korea who had formerly lived in a particular locale. Now, works on Chinese "ordinary lives" can be carried out in conventional ways, via fieldwork done within the PRC, but this was not always the case. Some of the first significant books about "ordinary lives" in the PRC that I encountered as an undergraduate and then a graduate student were ones, such as *Chen Village* and *Village and Family in Contemporary China*, that relied heavily upon extended interviews with former residents of Guangdong who had fled the mainland for Hong Kong.